

BOOK REVIEW

AVANESOVA, Nona A. *Buston VI – the Necropolis of Fire-Worshippers of Pre-Urban Bactria*. Samarkand: International Institute for Central Asian Studies (IICAS), 2016, 634 pp. ISBN 978-9943-357-36-5

Among the many publications on the history and archaeology of pre-urban cultures of the Bronze Age of Central Asia, there is one book that has been the focus of attention of the international academic community for several years now. This book is the monograph “*Buston VI – the necropolis of fire-worshippers of pre-urban Bactria*” (2016) by Nona Avanesova. The book not only arouses lively interest, but also by itself serves as a valuable documentary source and scientific example of the most complete description, systematization and interpretation of the material culture of Buston VI (BVI). It is one of the unique necropolises of the archaeological group of objects of the South Uzbekistan part of the Proto-Bactrian civilization of the 2nd millennium BC. BVI is the most representative late Bronze Age burial ground, which has drastically changed our notion of the origins and contents of the Bactrian civilization. The edition of the book in English is an updated and revised version of the Russian-language edition, which was published a few years earlier.

Nona A. Avanesova is a recognized expert in the field of the Paleo-Metal Age of the population of the Eurasian Steppe cultures and South of Uzbekistan. She is an experienced researcher and practising field archaeologist, a professor at the Samarkand State University (Uzbekistan). For more than 30 years, Nona A. Avanesova has been the head of the Archaeological Museum-Laboratory at the Samarkand State University. The academic achievements of the author of the book include a large number of historical and archaeological studies on the interaction and synthesis of cultures between settled agricultural and nomad cattle-breeding traditions. In 1985, academician A.A. Askarov invited her to study the monuments of the Sapalli Culture of the South of Uzbekistan. Since then, the burial grounds of the Bronze Age (Djarkutan and Buston) have become the main object of N. Avanesova’s archaeological research.

The Northern Bactrian region is situated on the fertile soils of the right bank of the Amu-Darya river and between the mountain ranges of the Kugitang-tau to the west and Gissar to the east is the cradle of the most ancient early urban civilization of Uzbekistan. However, it has long remained a mystery, which is why it has too often been explained only in terms of the Achaemenid conquest of Central Asia in the sixth century BC. However the large archaeological remains of early urban complexes – the of Sapallitepe, Djarkutan, Molali and Buston and Dashly in Afganistan – on both banks of the central Amu Darya river discovered by Akhmadali A. Askarov and Victor I. Sarianidi in the late 1960s and early 1970s testify to the existence of a unique settled agricultural civilization in the Bronze Age of the Bactrian region for a thousand years before the arrival of the Achaemenids. The settlements of this civilization have been

called in the archaeological literature monuments of the *Sapalli culture* (SC) and dated to 1800-950 BC.

The problem of the social interpretation of artefacts is considered in the book primarily in the context of the genesis and development of pre-state or complex societies of the Central Asian Bronze Age. The author sets out the various models of historical trajectories and transformations of social symbolism, hierarchies of mythological values and ritual practices, as well as the formation and development of religious ideology in one of the key cross-cultural regions of the Middle East. The formulation of the fundamental tasks and the depth of their study in this book convincingly demonstrates how important the informative possibilities of archaeological sources are in the reconstruction of the most complicated processes of social shifts of proto-urban societies.

The book argues that ritual practices contain the most essential answers to the challenges of complex societies at times of a shift in the historical cycle of a culture. The author points out that this publication seeks to put the most complete and comprehensive description of the archaeological source at the disposal of colleagues. It provides not only exhaustive graphic tables of every burial, but also the description of basic features of burial rites. Importantly the monograph includes a vast database of quantitative and qualitative indices constituted by the ritual groups and types of ritual objects, and artefacts.

Buston VI was explored from 1990 to 2008 as part of a field study carried out by the students of the Historical Faculty of the Samarkand State University and supervised by N. Avanesova. More than 500 different objects in various conditions were examined on the area of 6,176 m² in the course of 14 field seasons. These include burials, cremations, symbolic and false graves, cenotaphs, remains of funeral feasts, eight sunken feature buildings for cremation and nine sacralized grounds for traditional rituals alongside a number of ground altars and bonfire sites. Different samples of ritual and cult activities were reconstructed in the light of discovered and documented materials.

It has been ascertained that the materials of the site reflect a new unknown model of cultural genesis of the Proto-Bactrian civilization and indicate different situations of cultural shift and historical succession within the SC in the dominant steppe background. The revealed changes of vector of the cultural, historical and economic links allowed the author to produce convincing arguments for clarification of some issues on synchronization, the cultural links and history of the population of pre-urban Bactria.

It is impossible not to notice that the BVI complex with its abundance of very complicated burial cults stands out to its advantage compared with other sites of the SC. They show a variety of methods of burial and cult activities related to them and, thereby, prove that the ideological concepts of the Buston population were complicated enough. According to the sum of the material features attributed to it, N. Avanesova classified the site of BVI as the cult-burial complex of the temple type of Northern Bactria. From the chronological point of view, the Buston ceremonial centre is the earliest form of an open-type temple of the late second millennium BC. The evidence is the well-organized ritual-spatial structure of the necropolis being a stage ground for the symbolic dramaturgy of religious-ritual cults and burial practices.

Indeed, the evidence studied raises real questions about the epochal transformation of culture which, however, as the author acknowledges, are not always solvable. Therefore, some reservations are needed. It is noted in the book that the cultural innovation of the late second millennium BC in pre-urban Northern Bactria is the erection of special sacral grounds for non-burial purposes, where the ritual actions, liturgical ceremonies prescribed by tradition for interment and after, took place. In this case, if actions in the moment of burial (burning the corpse in a box (type I), exhibiting the dead (type II) etc.) took place in them, it is unclear why these sacral grounds are attributed to the objects of non-burial purpose? It is clear that they are not the burial itself, but an integral part of the burial rite.

In 1990 I proposed regarding the mortuary rite in general and SC in particular as a multistage cycle of ritual actions (all in all six stages were singled out) from the moment of death to the posthumous symbolic personification (funeral feasts and other commemorative acts). Undoubtedly, the given sacral constructions of BVI prove the presence of this burial cycle by the ritual transmission in the SC.

Another question that is raised concerns the separate group of objects in the necropolises such as the so-called fictitious, symbolic burial grounds, cenotaphs and sacrificial burials of animals. The author defines them as “graves of a not direct burial purpose”. But may the objects named as “graves and burial grounds” be of non-burial purpose? The word combination “symbolic graves” should be qualified. It seems that the use of “symbolic graves” as a contrast to the factual burial grounds may be allowed just at the level of an empiric classification of objects. In its ritual and semantic sense, the term “symbolic” is surplus relative and its meanings are obscured, because it raises the question: are other ritual burials deprived of symbolic content and can a ritual practice be other than symbolic?

The complex of factors characterizing the special features of the cultural-economical type of the Sapalli population and the historical conditions in the Proto-Bactrian society in the late second millennium BC presuppose the existence of preconditions needed for the origin and spread of a new ideology. And here, as N. Avanesova suggests, the serious stimulus for transformation was the penetration of some groups of the cattle-breeding population (the tribes of the Andronovo, Srubny, Tazabagyab and Beshkent cultures) into the Northern Bactrian region. The artefacts of other cultures also indicate the presence of diversity of the steppe traditions in the culture of the Buston population. We should support the author’s summary that the action of the steppe factor can explain the differentiated approach to the burial-ritual practice and spread of new forms of rites.

However, the statement that the diversity of ritual practice “is not linked to the inner tendencies of development of the Sapalli society” seems to be quite radical. The more so because the author admits that at the final stage of historical development of the pre-urban Bactria the penetration of the steppe population reflects a deep inner crisis taking place in the farming oases and connected to the worsening demographic and economic situation. But it is impossible not to agree with the author that at the final stage the peculiar pivot of further historical development was the steppe cultural genesis and revival of the local early Sapalli traditions in ritual and items.

Therefore, the unique materials of archaeological excavations of the BVI necropolis described in N. Avanesova’s monograph document the formation of a new period of SC

at the final stage of its transformation. The co-existence of different ceramic traditions, the artistic poly-stylistics in design of the metal and stone items, the multicomponent features of ritual practice reflect a complicated cultural and genetic process in the SC. There is the clear demonstration of a wide spectrum of growing cultural links with the population of the steppe world and it opens up the possibility of reaching new aspects of historical modeling.

The various collections of mono-functional clay items, votive bronze miniature replicas, ritual vessels, amulets, items of social prestige, and seals are especially important for the interpretation of worldview concepts and the ritual stylistics of the Buzton population. The complicated social order and mythological world were represented by phytomorphic, zoomorphic, and anthropomorphic symbolism. The most widespread popular mythological images in SC were winged creatures, birds, dragons, snakes, scorpions, bulls, sheep, goats, trees and shrubs.

By means of the rich collection of artefacts the author proves conclusively that the main subjects of the symbolic compositions are the struggle between good and evil forces and the worship of the four sacred elements – earth, water, air, and fire. Later these elements were included in the Rigveda and in Zoroastrian religious practice. But as this book shows, we can consider that these concepts had already made their first appearance in the Proto-Bactrian civilization by the second half of the second millennium BC.

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